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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 4909
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 7721
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1434
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 3676
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RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 4764
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 1432
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 005224

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SUBJECT: NCUB LEADER TAKES CREDIT FOR ORGANIZING BURMESE
PROTESTS, PREDICTS CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

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Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission James F. Entwistle, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) A member of a leading Burmese dissident organization told us his group was masterminding the protests that broke out recently in Burma. On October 1, we met with Soe Aung, a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee and Policy Board of the National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB), who stated that the current round of protests were part of a long term strategy orchestrated to put continuous pressure on the GOB. He said that October 1 marked the beginning of a new phase emphasizing civil disobedience. Satellite phones, unregistered cellular phones, and other informal modes of communication have reportedly been put in place to aid the exchange of information among a decentralized "command structure." Embassy Rangoon believes that the NCUB claim to be organizing protests inside Burma is exaggerated, but confirms that NCUB has provided communications equipment for activists inside Burma. End Summary.

LEARNING FROM THE MISTAKES OF 1988

2. (C) According to Soe Aung, over the past several months the NCUB (an umbrella organization of the four main opposition groups: National Democratic Front, the Democratic Alliance of Burma, the National League for

Democracy-Liberated Area, and the Members of the Parliament Union) has been working with its contacts inside Burma on a sustained protest movement to bring about change. He described one of the biggest flaws of the 1988 uprising as the centralized leadership structure, which significantly weakened the movement after the GOB imprisoned leaders or forced others to flee the country. Learning from the past, the NCUB has now developed a strategy to utilize a broad based group of activists, both previously known and unknown to the GOB, that could continue to function despite the detention of some members.

13. (C) Soe Aung stated that his organization, based in Thailand, was in daily contact with those inside Burma to assess the situation and tweak their strategy accordingly. One area of particular concern to NCUB leaders was that those protesting did not engage in violent actions. "We know the world is watching Burma right now," he said, "and we want them to see that we are a peaceful people working for democratic change." When NCUB leaders received reports that some protesters had begun to fight back against the authorities, including at least one incident where a protester used a sling shot against government forces, they sent word through their network to keep people calm.

14. (C) When asked how NCUB officials continue to communicate with those inside Burma, considering numerous reports that cell phone and email had become increasingly unavailable, Soe Aung replied that they anticipated such a move by the GOB and pre-positioned satellite phones and unregistered cell phones. Aung added that they continued to rely on informal modes of communication, such as using people who were able to cross the border.

MOVING TO PHASE TWO: CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

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15. (C) The current protests represented only phase one of their long term strategy, Aung claimed. Beginning on October 1, the NCUB was encouraging people to practice acts of civil disobedience, including reporting to their place of employment but not performing any work. He claimed some civil servants would also adopt this approach, at the NCUB's urging, and he claimed the government could not outright chastise them because "technically they are not doing anything." While demonstrations of various sorts would continue in other cities in the country, the center of opposition activity would remain Rangoon due to its international prominence.

16. (C) According to Aung's sources within Burma, public sentiment was getting angrier at the government. In his opinion, this boded well for the ability to maintain the momentum begun by the protests. He also echoed observations others have made to us that people recognized this was their best opportunity to bring about change in Burma and that if they were to give up now, it "could be another 20 or even 40 years before they have such an opening."

TRANSITION GOVERNMENT SHOULD INCLUDE MILITARY

17. (C) Describing the composition of a transition government should the demonstration strategy prove successful, the NCUB recommended utilizing the transition proposal put forth by the NLD last year. This would include having the military lead a caretaker government, convening a parliament comprised of those members elected in 1990, and utilizing Aung San Suu Kyi as a symbolic leader outside of the fray of politics to aid in bridging the gap with the ethnic groups. Such a government could draft a new constitution and call for new elections. Soe Aung claimed that when the NLD released this

proposal, various opposition groups endorsed it, including a number of ethnic groups. When asked whether those inside Burma would accept exiled leaders' immediate return to positions of power, he claimed that there was widespread support for such a move.

COMMENT

18. (C) NCUB has sources and contacts inside Burma, but is also has its own agenda. Embassy Rangoon notes that NCUB claims to be leading the protests are exaggerated, although NCUB has provided communications equipment to activists inside Burma. We also question Aung's claim that the return of the exiles would be widely accepted. Nonetheless, we believe it is useful to keep track of what the very active exile groups in Thailand are trying to do, particularly as they have their own lines of communication to the international media and human rights organizations.

19. (U) This cable has been coordinated with Embassy Rangoon.
BOYCE